

## Be Not Afraid

A very young family is uprooted from their familiar surroundings. They are powerless pawns in a much larger global political game in which they have no control. They make a perilous journey to a place where they are unwelcomed. Taking refuge in a barn, they carve out the most improbable of places in which a doorway is made for God to come among us. The Child born of this miracle will spend a lifetime teaching us about such doorways. He himself becomes the widest door to the surprise of God's grace. The homelessness and rejection which begins before his birth will follow him throughout his life. He makes his home with outcasts and welcomes sinners to dine with him. He designs his life in such a way that he unmask all the cruel human games by which we victimize and scapegoat others to make ourselves feel safe. The greatest unmasking happens on a cross, where he exposes the depth of our violent plots. And when God raises him from the dead, it is the greatest of all the doorways of grace. It proves that "nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God." Jesus taught us that we will continue to meet him and discover God's presence among those who seem the least likely candidates to be bearers of the Divine. We, who have been formed around this radical message of presence and hope, are called to live out of this world-transforming principle, and to make a welcoming home for those who so desperately need a place of refuge. The Syrian refugee crisis which has unfolded in the past year—together with the tragic events surrounding the ISIS attack on Paris, Beirut, and other countries—unmask the complexity of our current global reality. Terrorism gives birth to a fear which can kill our capacity for compassion.

(From Bishop Jim Gonia, Rocky Mountain Synod, ELCA)

The most-repeated phrase throughout both the Old and New Testaments is *do not fear*. At the very center of our religion is a steadfast security that rests in the loving presence of the Eternal. As the Apostle Paul writes: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." Ideally, the Christian's mindset is one of confident optimism even in seemingly dire situations. We are called to be bright beacons to the broken even as we too face the storm, knowing God is with us.

The reason the command not to fear is so prevalent in Scripture is because there was so much for people to be afraid of. We'd be delusional to look around at the world we're living in and *not* be concerned. With "if it bleeds it leads" news feeds running non-stop through media it's easy to become spiritually disoriented and to lose sight of hope. When that happens in your soul; when faith leaks out, fear seeps in—and you start sinking. Once fear becomes the dominant force in your life, you end up becoming more and more terrified, more desperate, more jittery, more reactionary. You grow more hostile to those you perceive as outsiders, more contemptible of those who are different, more drawn to protection and violence and aggression.

In other words: You become less and less like Jesus. We should treat fear like sin. Don't let it corrupt your soul and make you hate. This is the most difficult path.

In an odd sort of way, we are fortunate to be faced with fear because it creates an opportunity to make deeper choices for love and compassion in our hearts. We are experiencing a similar

energy in our society that was experienced in much of Europe during World War II where Jews and others were rounded up, put in concentration camps and murdered. Such was the fruit of fear and hysteria. Where were the prophetic voices of Christ during that era of oppression and genocide? Sadly, there were few.

For the first time since World War II, there are more than 50 million refugees in the world. Watching politicians rush to shut the doors against Syrian refugees, I find it fascinating that it seems to be those who are most insistent that this is a Christian nation who appear most eager to disprove it. Exploiting fear to drive wedges between people of different ethnicity and religion is particularly odious and the opposite of what our Lord and Master was all about. Although appropriate actions must be taken when screening refugees to insure safety, in the final analysis, love, inclusion and compassion are always a risk. A risk our Lord repeatedly took.

A former refugee who is now a pastor writes: *As the son of a war refugee, it hurts to see the distrust of refugees. It sickens me to see refugees and the very people they are trying to escape held in the same regard. It sickens me to see distrust and hatred of an entire religion, based on the actions of extremists. In the United States, no one wants to be grouped with Adam Lanza (Killed 20 first graders and six adults in Sandy Hook Elementary School.) or Dylan Roof (Killed nine African Americans and injured another in a Charleston, SC church). I understand the need to protect ourselves, but I also know the rigorous process it takes for a refugee to set foot in America. As a pastor, it angers me to see mercy being cast aside and sunk in a pool of ignorance and fear. We are supposed to embody the peace of Christ to the world. The second chapter of Ephesians reminds us that Christ was a unifier. Christ sought to break down barriers and connect with those whom society cast aside. So make no mistake, this is an issue of faith above politics.*

(Pastor Nate Luong, take from Saint Peter Herald, 12/17/15)

To end on a note of hope, Steven Pinker, author of the book “The Better Angels of Our Nature—How Violence Has Declined” recently wrote an article entitled: “The World Is Not Falling Apart” where he said:

**“Never mind the headlines, we have never lived in such peaceful times. The kinds of violence to which most people are vulnerable—homicide, rape, battering, child abuse—have been in steady decline in most of the world. Autocracy is giving way to democracy. Wars between countries—by far the most destructive of all conflicts—are all but obsolete. The increase in the number and deadliness of civil wars since 2010 is puny in comparison with the decline that preceded it, and unlikely to escalate. Why is the world always “more dangerous than it has ever been”—even as a greater and greater majority of humanity lives in peace and dies of old age?”**

(From [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/foreigners/2014/12/the\\_world\\_is\\_not\\_falling\\_apart\\_the\\_trend\\_lines\\_reveal\\_an\\_increasingly\\_peaceful.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2014/12/the_world_is_not_falling_apart_the_trend_lines_reveal_an_increasingly_peaceful.html))

An educational opportunity you may be interested in is “Learning about Islam—The Jesus Fatwah”. See next page. A sign up sheet is in the Fellowship Hall.

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